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AUTHOR	McBeath, Clare; Nicholson, Lindsay
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ABSTRACT

The research methods selected for an evaluation of courses in vocational education and training (VET) teacher education at Curtin University (Western Australia) were examined. The university hired an outside research body from a different TAFE college to conduct the evaluation because Curtin University's courses in postschool teacher education, designed for trainers in Technical and Further Education (TAFE) colleges, industry, and government, were reviewed and extensively restructured 3 years earlier, and the teaching staff considered themselves too close to the program. Planned evaluation methods will include a review of the literature, including state and federal government policy directives; interviews with TAFE and industry management; interviews with Curtin lecturers; and surveys of past and present students. An in-depth analysis and discussion of results should assist the evaluators to come up with a set of recommendations to be published in a detailed report. It is expected that after the evaluation is completed and any recommendations implemented, Curtin University will have strong evidence to continue to claim that its courses are relevant, up-to-date, and based on industry training needs. (KC)

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Evaluating teacher training for industry trainers

Clare McBeath

Curtin University, Western Australia

Lindsay Nicholson

QRD consulting, West Coast College

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This paper examines the selection of research methods for an evaluation of Curtin University's courses in vocational education and training (VET) teacher education.

The evaluation will be carried out by an outside research body. As the courses were newly upgraded and rewritten for distance and online delivery just over three years ago, the lecturing staff are still too close to the material to undertake a new evaluation. The selection of a research body from a technical and further education (TAFE) college, in this instance, will provide impartiality towards the material and a more valid assessment of market need.

Methods will include a review of the literature, including State and Federal government policy directives, interviews with TAFE and industry management, and with Curtin lecturers and surveys of past and present students.

It is a requirement at Curtin University, as at many other educational institutions, to review courses every five years. The review process is an accountability procedure to ensure that courses are regularly updated and their relevance evaluated against the needs of the students and changing practices in society and industry.

Curtin University's courses in post-school teacher education, designed for trainers in TAFE colleges, industry and government, were reviewed and extensively restructured three years ago. There were then five vocational education and training courses offered at undergraduate and graduate level, as follows:

- Associate Degree (Training)
- Bachelor of Arts (Vocational Education and Training)
- Graduate Certificate (Tertiary Teaching)
- Graduate Certificate (Training)
- Graduate Diploma in Education (Higher and Further)

The current courses had been revised using data from surveys of past and present students and industry employers, as well as incidental feedback from students to individual lecturers. The course team had also appraised prospectuses from other universities offering similar courses. The selection of units (or subjects) to be included in the courses was rigorous. Each unit had been individually justified and reshaped according to the survey data before it was accepted by a critical curriculum decision making team.

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The restructured courses also had to be adapted to fit new university requirements on credit points, duration and unit size. They had to be written for distance education and reformatted for offering online. It was possibly the most detailed update since the course was introduced over 20 years ago. The upgrade was a very heavy undertaking for all those involved, demanding a high level of professional energy to work intensively on so many subjects at one time, and the development team members were anxious to move on with other aspects of their professional lives when the upgrade was finished.

Now the courses are entering their fourth year and it is necessary to begin the review process again, to evaluate again in time for rewriting in 2002 and for offering the next upgrade in 2003.

This announcement was greeted initially with disbelief. It seemed such a short while since the last upgrade was completed. The staff began to articulate their fear that they had very little new to offer to their courses. The recent, intensive rewrite had left them very close to their own units and drained of new ideas. They had put as much as they could into the materials and it was easy to feel that they could not be perfected any further.

Meanwhile, as we know, the training scene itself has changed. There has been a general downgrading of desired professional qualifications in the training scene. University degrees are undervalued by TAFE colleges, the State Departments responsible for training and employment and by ANTA on the federal scene. Very few trainers receive either time or financial assistance to undertake university studies any more. The exceptions to these constraints are coming from industry, but industry trainers are more difficult to reach and their numbers in Curtin's courses are still small.

Economic rationalism has brought about changes in the language of training. An overemphasis on training as little more than the assessment of observable competencies has encouraged a minimalisation of reflective practice and critical thinking. As much as we may deplore this, we still have to be aware of its existence and make sure our courses acknowledge the strengths and weaknesses of such approaches.

Furthermore, industry reform and the devaluing of university professional qualifications have made it much harder to market university courses for trainers. Student numbers are falling across Australia. In these circumstances, we certainly need to review our courses and see what we can do to make them more attractive to the market for which they were designed.

Why evaluate courses

Virtually all the literature on curriculum development emphasises the importance of evaluation as part of the course development process. However, it is probably the most neglected part of development. Often this is because funded development tends to use up the budget on needs analysis and on the production of course materials, and evaluation of the completed materials is dropped for economic reasons. Or, evaluation may take place during the writing and trialling of the

materials, but rarely as a formal process once the materials have been used for a number of years.

Even in the university context, where the five-year review and evaluation process is supported by policy and practice, more often than not, the process is not specifically funded and staff are rarely given release time to do it properly. Sometimes an outside reviewer is called in as part of the process and some of the more important decisions are left in his or her hands, but most of the work usually remains the responsibility of overworked staff.

Yet there are many reasons why courses should be regularly reviewed and updated. Basically, it is to make them more saleable in a highly competitive field, but there is also an intrinsic satisfaction in being able to say that one's own course materials are current, relevant, of high quality, well structured and well written. I suppose most course coordinators would like to think that their own coursework might be the best in the country - or at least that is how we feel.

Tyler, reviewing the evaluation field in 1991, listed six reasons for evaluation, namely:

1. to monitor present programs;
2. to select a better available program to replace one now in use that is deemed relatively ineffective;
3. to assist in developing a new program;
4. to identify the differential effects of the program with different populations of students or other clients;
5. to provide estimates of effects and costs in the catalogue of programs listed in consumer resource centres;
6. to test the relevance and validity of the principles upon which the program is based (Tyler 1991, p 4).

Points 1, 4 and 6 probably apply best to our planned evaluation. We want to monitor it. We believe it is already a good program and we do not intend to develop a new one. We hope to tap into the client groups and their management and check whether we are meeting their perceived needs. We are already locked into university policies regarding funding and cost effectiveness, for better or for worse. Most importantly to us, however, is Tyler's final point on testing the relevance and validity of the current program and making changes if and as necessary.

Specifically, the purpose of our evaluation is to find out the worth or value of the courses in a changing environment. Curriculum teams need to find out how good their courses and materials are, and whether they continue to work in practice, or whether parts have to be changed or adapted.

We need to go far beyond verifying that the course objectives match the course outcomes, as some evaluators claim is what is required. Educational programs may have many aims, many objectives, many outcomes not expressed in the aims and, often, many *stakeholders* or *audiences* with different aims (Straton 1975). Straton saw evaluation as follows.

> Educational evaluation is the process of delineating, obtaining, and providing information about an educational programme which is of use in describing the programme and in making judgments and decisions related to the programme (Straton 1975, p 4).

Some stakeholders are interested in whether students can follow the course, or cope with the structure, the workload or the pace, whether it is at the right level, or how much they are gaining from it. Others are more interested in whether the course was useful to students in the world of work. Some are concerned with how much it costs and whether it is worth the investment, while others again might be concerned with the effect of new teaching modes or new materials.

All these approaches tell us something about the value and the worth of the course, but they do so from different perspectives.

Our perspectives also have to be wide and varied. The stakeholders in our courses include not only past, present and future students, but their employers, their potential employers, and both State and Federal Government departments which have an interest in industry training and are currently influencing standards of professional development in the training field. The university is also a stakeholder, as its requirements and regulations, such as the Consolidated Teaching Policy, have a significant impact on standards and quality, and the length, size and level of the courses. The lecturing staff who wrote and now teach and assess the individual units are also very powerful stakeholders. They are the ones who have been most closely monitoring the units and noticing where there might be discrepancies and changing factors influencing the course. The lecturing staff also are dedicated to their fields of expertise and often have a very wide perspective across its theory and practice in many different contexts. A proportion of the staff have PhDs in the training field, and all are engaged in research, writing and publishing in their areas. It is this very important fact, indeed, that seems to have been overlooked by ANTA in its attempts to remove universities from any significant role in the training of trainers.

The evaluation plan

The idea of choosing an outside evaluator began to form as a result of the staff response mentioned earlier. An outside evaluator would give us a different perspective. An evaluator selected from the market served by our courses would give us better insights into that market's interest and response. The Curtin team began looking around at training research groups in Perth. We also began seeking some funding to make it possible.

Even though our TAFE market has been shrinking and our industry trainer group growing and becoming identified as an important future client, we had to turn to TAFE to find a research organisation equipped to handle the research. The Department of Training and Employment in Western Australia (WA) organised two seminars last year, inviting interested researchers and research organisations to participate and present examples of their research. Most were from TAFE colleges, and it was an excellent chance to get an overview of the sort of research in progress in the State.

We invited QRD Consulting from West Coast College at Joondalup to draw up a proposal. Curtin staff had worked with them before and were impressed by the standard of their work.

QRD Consulting envisaged its role as a combined one, including the evaluation, the maintenance and improvement (defined as effectiveness and saleability) of the Curtin courses. They identified their objectives as follows:

- to overview the current offerings of the program;
- to identify key factors attracting students to, and retaining students in, the program;
- to identify the level of interest or disinterest among training managers in TAFE colleges, government departments and industry;
- to identify future changes for strengthening the program; and
- to identify any untapped potential market.

From these data they proposed to establish the value of Curtin's teacher education courses and their relevance to industry and government vocational education and training needs. They further proposed to provide short term and long term recommendations for improvement of the courses. The final report is planned to give clear insights into the strengths, weaknesses and future opportunities for the Curtin program.

The researchers planned to contact industry and government trainers, academic institutions and staff and individual learners as the main stakeholders in the study.

The background research stage, stage 1, will consist of familiarisation for the researchers with the coursework. This exists in full distance education mode in print-based and online formats, and is easily available. In the five courses there are in fact only 16 different units, so browsing the materials will not be such a large task as it first may seem.

Stage 2 of the research will be a general consultation with the stakeholders, gathering data on which to base the major survey instruments. At stage 2 also, further background research will continue as Curtin lecturers are interviewed in depth to ascertain their perspectives on each of the units. This is expected to provide rich and detailed data.

Stage 2 will also make initial contact with TAFE college management, and managers of those private providers where staff have undertaken one of Curtin's courses. The Department of Training and Employment will also be contacted at this stage, although officially the Department is required to follow the lead of the federal Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, and ANTA in particular. It has been difficult over a period of years to ascertain any opinion at all from this group, and we suspect it is because under present economic conditions, they are unprepared to pay for training. This is the situation throughout Australia at present, although there are indications that things might change in the future. We envisage that much of the contact made with management groups at this stage is more awareness raising than data collection.

The third stage will be the major survey, the nature of which will not become final until the completion of the interviews in stage 2. However, the survey will include present and past successful students, and those who have dropped out. It is hoped to gather data on how the course has helped, or is helping, them with their careers and with their sense of professionalism. It will also seek information on details of the strengths and weaknesses of units and where students and ex-students believe units should be changed. It is expected at this stage that another survey will be conducted with selected management stakeholders, to collect more global data on their perspective on the usefulness and desirability of the Curtin courses.

An in-depth analysis and discussion of results should assist the evaluators to come up with a set of recommendations to be published in a detailed report.

Conclusion

It is an interesting experience setting up such a detailed evaluation at a time when our traditional market group is less interested than it has ever been. There is an undeserved anti-universities climate growing in the training field. On the other hand, university lecturers in the training field are as informed and up to date as any group in the country and, in Curtin's case at least, we believe we have an excellent product for sale.

The evaluation may reach findings which we don't want to hear, and we may have to make changes we don't want to make. However, the evaluation will have two positive results for Curtin University. One is that, after any recommendations are put in place, we will have strong evidence to continue to claim that our courses are relevant, up to date and based on industry training needs. The second result is that we will have promulgated some awareness raising among a group that has been trying to ignore us. It is possible that they might be impressed.

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Contact details

Clare McBeath
Email: mcbeath@spectrum.curtin.edu.au